

CHAYEI SARA 5786

In Chapter 24 of our Parsha, we read of Eliezer's assignment to find an appropriate wife for Yitzchak. He arrives in Mesopotamia with ten camels and many servants and devises a test. If a young maiden offers him water and draws water for his camels, she would qualify to join the house of Avraham. The Torah relates that when Rivka arrives by the well, immediately Eliezer runs to greet her (24:15-17). Now, as the Torah states earlier (v.13), there were many girls who came to the well. What was it about Rikva that suddenly caught Eliezer's attention? Rashi (on v.17), quoting the Midrash (B'reishit Rabba 60:5), says that Eliezer saw that the water in the well rose to greet her. Clearly, a miraculous sign. If so, asks Rav Avigdor Nebenzahl (Sicha, Chayei Sarah 5770), why was it necessary to further test Rivka? His answer: signs are one thing, important perhaps, but insufficient to make a shidduch. The miracle of the water fascinated Eliezer. He immediately took notice of Rivka and ran to her, but it wasn't enough. One must investigate the character of a person to determine whether or not she is suitable to marry into a noble family. And insofar as Yitzchak was concerned, that primary and central character attribute was chesed - kindness. And so, the chesed trial began.

To appreciate Rivka's extraordinary display of chesed, we must distinguish between two types of this virtuous trait. For purposes of this brief analysis, let us call the first natural/common chesed and the second uncommon/abnormal chesed. Natural chesed is the display of beneficence that we generally associate with chesed. When is it performed? - the moment we are sensitive to a need in another, when we sense a lacking, the absence of something important in the life of a person - rich or poor, friend or stranger. And when we are quick to respond and address that need and provide for whatever is missing, we are performing a kindness on the normal natural chesed spectrum. It could be helping someone with funds, offering your time to advise, to encourage, to console, making a kind gesture, or just being present to celebrate a simcha with your friend. The critical point about this form of chesed is that it is triggered by some external factor, occasioned by something you notice in the stressful condition of another which elicits a chesed response from you, the empathetic observer.

Rivka's chesed, however, was of an entirely different order completely, a much higher, uncommon and, yes, abnormal expression of this exceptional attribute. Rav Nebenzahl asks us to pay close attention to Rivka's behavior when Eliezer just asks her for some water. Rivka is quite a young maiden, according some, she was but a child. After Eliezer makes his modest request, Rivka, herself responds by offering to draw water for all 10 camels. Now, this had to be one difficult and exhausting task, especially for someone so young. Imagine, with just one small bucket, going back and forth to the well, and who knows how many times to satisfy ten thirsty camels who, fresh from the desert, required enormous amounts of water (100+ liters each). Did Rivka even ask Eliezer to help her? - No. Did any of the many servants who accompanied Eliezer lift a finger to help? No! Rivka completes the entire watering by herself with ne'er a complaint. Eliezer is dumbfounded, stunned, as the Torah recounts, "And the man was astonished at her... " (24:21). Rivka passes the chesed test with flying colors, and Eliezer is now convinced that by virtue of this incomparable and unique chesed performance, he has found the right match for his master's son. She fully qualifies to join Yitzchak in the unfolding destiny of the Patriarchal Covenant - B'RIT AVOT.

How then are we to define this second abnormal chesed? Unlike natural chesed which is prompted by a perceived need in another, this uncommon chesed springs from within the person himself. Much like a hungry person who craves food and without it feels an aching and discomfort, so too this superior ba'al chesed. He innately so much desires to practice deeds of loving-kindness that when deprived of this opportunity, he actually experiences distress and genuine sadness. Avraham, the supreme ba'al chesed, even in his post-circumcision pain, simply can neither abide nor tolerate not being able to welcome wayfarers and thus satisfy his ethical inner compulsion to do chesed. So much so that HaShem, who sought to give him some needed rest after his surgery, finally relents and sends him three guests. When Rivka demonstrated that she too possessed this same extraordinary chesed persona, Eliezer had no doubt that she would be warmly welcomed into the family of Avraham.

Rav Nebenzahl then goes one step further and argues that this rarified level of chesed was introduced by none other than the Almighty Himself who created the world so that He could have worthy recipients upon whom He could shower His chesed. And for HaShem, who is RAV CHESED (Sh'mot 34:6), this foundational ethical feature is surely one of Gd's most exalted of attributes.

There are many ways to understand the famous Chazal of MAASEI AVOT SIMAN LABANIM. It can mean that the events of our ancestors foreshadow our own. Such a meaning asserts that the historical patterns of our people repeat themselves with different players over time often with similar psychological and social challenges, and by studying the Biblical narratives, the lives of our forebears can provide indispensable wisdom to guide us through these difficult experiences. There can, however, be an additional meaning to this rabbinic dictum. To wit: that our Patriarchs and Matriarchs, through their highly sensitive ethical conduct, have implanted within our Jewish DNA the ability and fortitude to behave with similar moral excellence. When the Talmud (Y'vamot 79a) takes it as a fact that three distinguishing traits characterize the Jewish people, our Sages were enunciating an apodictic truism which proclaims that we too are genetically gifted to exhibit those same great virtues of compassionate mercy, humble shyness and bountiful chesed.

Of course, most may not be able to measure up to the high ethical standards of an Avraham or Rivka. Truth to be said, it be wonderful if all people could just cultivate the very first order of chesed and respond sympathetically to the needs of others. But just knowing that such elevated summits of noble character are possible, gives us all something to aspire toward. For indeed, if we strive to reach for those stars of goodness and attempt to scale those supreme ethical peaks, we may happily discover that we can reach levels of ethical righteousness that, previously, we never thought possible.